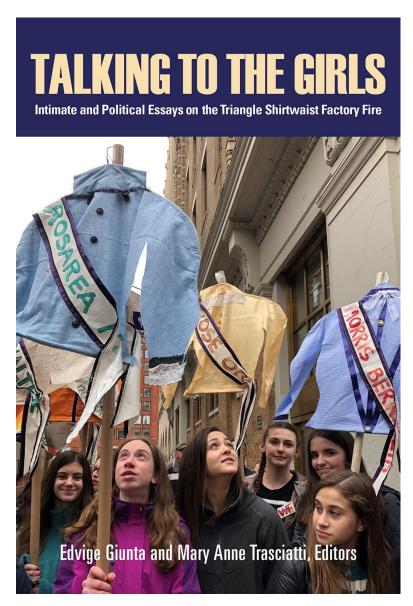# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Talking to the Girls

by Doris Friedensohn

EDVIGE GIUNTA & MARY ANN TRASCIATTI (2022). TALKING TO THE GIRLS: INTIMATE AND POLITICAL ESSAYS ON THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE. NEW YORK: NEW VILLAGE PRESS.

Edvige Giunta & Mary Ann Trasciatti (2022). *Talking to the Girls: Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.* **New York: New Village Press.**

Talking to the Girls is a deceptively simple title for a rich collection of essays about teaching the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. The fire, which occurred just off New York's Washington Square Park, claimed the lives of 146 girls and women, garment workers all. Editors Edvige Giunta and Mary Anne Trasciatti have seized upon this workplace tragedy to teach - - starting with their own classes - - writing, research skills, family studies, and working-class history to college students and others. While their inquiry begins by locating the victims - - girls, women, and their immigrant families in Lower Manhattan - - it moves toward larger questions of class, the urban economy, social justice, early 20th Century New York, and archival sources for the writing of history.

Crucial to the success of the volume are the editors' skills as teachers of writing. Giunta and Trasciatti believe that writing matters. Yes, writing expands consciousness. It fuels a sense of connection - - to family, neighborhood, and community. Writing alerts students, often first-hand, to gritty workplaces and the structure of opportunity (or no opportunity) in America. Through writing about the Triangle Fire - - and joining in some commemorative events - - students glimpse the ugly underside of the American Dream. Writing, they struggle to make sense of the hopes and disappointments which have shaped their families and their own lives. Writing, they respond to events which would otherwise seem distant, multi-faceted, and, yes, above their pay grade.

Among the contributors --in addition to college teachers and their students -- are union organizers, a social worker, a poet, and an Episcopal priest. In their separate essays and as a "collective," these writers underline links between vulnerable workers, sweatshops, corporate greed, and global capitalism. Students who may have started out thinking about the Triangle Fire as a tragic moment in the lives of some New York immigrants and their families discover analogous patterns elsewhere. In Bangladesh, for example. They learn about the 2012 Tazreen Fashions factory fire, on the outskirts of Dhaka, killing 146 workers; and then the collapse of five factories killing over 1,000 workers and injuring more than 2,500. In a powerful Epilogue, the editors interview Kalpona Akter, a Bangladeshi garment worker turned activist. Akter says, memorably, "One hundred and twenty years after the Triangle fire, we had to lose over 1500 workers to get an accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh." She concludes, "The Triangle fire changed the whole labor movement. You saw that fire happen. You saw that people died. You saw that burned building. That history will teach you that you can make a change."

Giunta and Trasciatti's readers can imagine the Triangle building burning. Like the student researchers and other contributors to the volume, they might be impelled to visit the Memorial and contemplate "a ribbon of metal rising to the ninth floor where most of the 146 worked." They might also discover the connections between that event of over a century ago and the dangers that, even today, American workers continue to face. The rest resides in the process that the teaching sets in motion: first, for students to find in themselves the strength to fight injustice; and second, to know that their efforts, however modest, speak to hope, decency, and a better future. Readers of this engaging and important volume will want to do no less.